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The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites

Litt, Eden ; Hargittai, Eszter

Abstract: When people construct and share posts on social network sites like Facebook and Twitter, whom do they imagine as their audience? How do users describe this imagined audience? Do they have a sub-audience in mind (e.g., “friends who like reality television”)? Do they share more broadly and abstractly (e.g., “the public”)? Do such imaginings fluctuate each time a person posts? Using a mixed-methods approach involving a 2-month-long diary study of 119 diverse American adults and their 1,200 social network site posts, supplemented with follow-up interviews (N = 30), this study explores the imagined audience on social network sites. The findings reveal that even though users often interacted with large diverse audiences as they posted, they coped by envisioning either very broad abstract imagined audiences or more targeted specific imagined audiences composed of personal ties, professional ties, communal ties, and/or phantasmal ties. When people had target imagined audiences in mind, they were most often homogeneous and composed of people’s friends and family. Users’ imaginings typically fluctuated among these audience types as they posted even though the potential audience as per their posts’ privacy settings often did not change. The findings provide a list of audience types, as well as detailed descriptions, examples, and frequencies on which future research can build. With people’s online presence playing an important role for their reputations, these findings provide more insight into for whom people are managing their privacy and whom they have in mind as they share.

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Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai

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